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ABSTRACT

Frequently, writing students are so concerned with correct grammar and mechanics that their essays are stilted and dry. Their writing is further hampered by rhetorical formulas that describe what the structure of the essay should be when it is finished but not how to go about writing it. Can poetic invention strategies help produce better essays? Possibly, in that they focus on getting the writer started rather than on the finished product. The divisions of classical rhetoric refer to discovering in the universe outside, while poetic heuristics focus on the writers making discoveries that are both within their experiences and part of the world outside. Teachers can guide their classes through group exercises to instigate this discovery. The crucial characteristic shared by such exercises is a well-defined, easily apprehended structure that needs completion. For example, a teacher might set up a "now/then" or "it seemed to be/but really is" dichotomy. This kind of structure takes the pressure off of student writers by allowing them to focus on details. The creative writing exercise can add to traditional rhetoric by recognizing that imagination is a faculty that can be developed. (HTH)

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Rhetorical Strategies in Composition and Creative Writing

Although problems with grammar and writing mechanics frequently dominate discussions of "what's-wrong-with-student-papers," an even more basic concern is what would still be wrong with the papers even if they had no technical problems. The question in a more positive form than "what's wrong with the paper" is "what's good about the paper?" Sometimes the answer is a rather sour "not very much." Sometimes, indeed, when the student demonstrates competent techniqūe, the teacher can despair because the paper is still awful. Perhaps even <u>because</u> the paper is technically correct, the paper is awful. To avoid comma splices, sentence fragments, and other pitfalls, the student has written a "safe" paper that contains no subordinate, coordinate, or relative clauses. The paper's topic will probably be as boring and free of risk: a topic like how nice summer is. These papers try the patience of teachers who become outraged at reading, maybe in one week, 100 papers full of dreary, padded platitudes. The students are also outraged to find that papers unmarked by grammar errors do not necessarily earn A's.

Boring papers, dismayed teachers, resentful and confused students -- these problems are fairly common. How can the problems be solved? I suspect that many of the people who teach creative writing are best prepared to address this problem. In my research in composition, I noticed a curious fact. Many of the best writers who specialize in research on writing are themselves poets: Mina Shaughnessy, Janet Emig, and James Moffett. I'm sure I have left out many names, but it's not necessary here to be inclusive. There is another related point. Many writers who have made their reputations as poets, novelists, or essayists also write about writing. This list can begin with E. B. White and includes such names as Donald Hall, William Stafford, and Grace Paley.

That people who write well about composition themselves engage in writing generally described as creative is not altogether surprising. Many people have deplored the attempts to separate creative and other forms of writing. William Irmscher, for instance, argues against attempts to divide writing into "either an expression of feeling or an expression of thought."[1] All writing is both. People who themselves write see writing, I am sure, much more holistically than people who don't. The distinction is artificial and is maintained institutionally by schools. All writing is, at some level, creative. By refusing to acknowledge that creativity plays a part in all people's lives, we diminish both human beings and the writing they produce. I asked Janet Emig about the connection between practicing writers and their work on writing. She replied to the effect that people who write are less likely to say something foolish about how the process works because they can check their ideas about writing with their own practices. This rather incisive point is extended in a slightly different direction by Charles Cooper and Lee Odell when they raise questions about composition which deserve research: "What are

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the practices that allow skillful student and professional writers to evolve successful pieces of written discourse?"[2] The question is then what do skillful writers do when they write?

This question is both basic and difficult to answer directly since writers are often not fully conscious of how they work. But we don't need to give up on this issue because it is difficult. Writers do talk and write about their composing processes and most have disclosed that they don't write the way traditional writing manuals advise students to write: they don't use the approach of beginning with an outline and developing a thesis and topic sentences that textbooks describe as standard procedure. Irmscher, indeed, going back to even pre-writing activities, finds students trying so hard to follow the linear method of the textbooks that their approach to writing or even discussing issues begins to confine them. Often they will write filler or even lie (in the sense that they don't write what they're really thinking) just so they can fashion something that fits the model.

> The need for directness in answering questions poses a difficulty for many students when we in the English classroom ask them to discuss, that is, to be discursive. Many of them seek the same kind of linear direction that exists between a single question and a correct answer. And that kind of single-directedness does not allow the mind to play, to associate, to discover, to formulate.[3]

Students, for one reason or another, are often so concerned with being correct that class discussions deteriorate into identifying the right answer and compositions often follow a form rather than a function.

Students often cling to the formula of the five-paragraph essay as if to a lifeline. The five-paragraph essay they have been taught as a model (introduction, three major points, conclusion), they treat as if it were the correct answer to every writing assignment. What happens if they have four points? They suppress one. I suspect that students depend on the model because they have not been taught to experiment creatively. Moffett has argued that "it is a great mistake for the teacher to imagine an opposition between 'creative writing' and idea writing. The ideas in plays and novels may not be named, as in exposition, but they are there. They are implicit in the selection, arrangement, and patterning of events and character."[4] Unfortunately many people think of creative writing as something totally different from other forms of writing. This separation coincides with contemporary notions of artists as strange beings, not like normal people who might want to write business memoranda or technical reports.

My theory is that, at least at the beginning of a project, many writers -- poets, mechanical engineers, essayists -- will share similar problems and that the practices of creative writers can be useful for student writers of essays. Rhetorical strategies in textbooks often look like diagrams. For instance, in writing comparison and contrast papers, students are often told to use versions of the following patterns:

Pattern I	or Pattern II
Introduction	Introduction
Section A: Similarities	Point 1: Similarities, then Differences
Section B: Differences	Point 2: Similarities, then Differences
Conclusion	Point 3: Similarities, then Differences
	etc.
	Conclusion

These formulas do have a use because they do give students an abstract description of many comparison and contrast papers. The problem with them is that they describe essays post facto. Students need to know how writers get started. In other words, to build a house it helps to know how people go about building houses -- not just what a finished house looks like from outside. What we're primarily teaching students with prescriptive formulas is very much like working math problems backwards, starting with the answers in the back of the book. It's no wonder the papers students write so frequently look as stilted as the working through of a high school algebra problem.

Much good modern work on the composition process focuses on invention, sometimes known as heuristics, and concerns itself with methods by which writers discover what they have to say.[5] Many people consider this intuitive stage crucial but inexplicable. They are uneasy about this stage and assume it depends on inspiration. Although intuition isn't 100% reliable for finding something to say and a way to say it, still we can surely teach students about intuition -- if nothing else, at least tell them about it. It is here that creative invention exercises are most important. Traditional heuristics, like their models from Greek and Roman traditions, primarily concentrate on rational models. Intuition (or emotion) has for the most part a silent place in a system based on reverence for a largely rational and mechanistic critical tradition. Even modern linguistic invention strategies are largely rational since they depend on analytical questions that writers ask themselves.[6] The advantages of poetic invention strategies (and I use poetic to include fictive) accrue from their concentration on the intuitive.

In a theoretical article, Richard Young raised a number of interesting questions, a couple of which are pertinent here:

> What are the similarities and dissimilarities between composing a poem and composing nonfictional discourse? . . . Why do many assume that effective arts of invention cannot be developed for composing poetry while they assume that such arts can be developed for composing nonfiction?[7]

First of all, I would recommend that we at least temporarily disregard the differences between composing a poem and composing nonfictional discourse. Whatever the final product, at the beginning the writer must open his imagination to discover the range and depth of his material. Secondly, while some theorists may be assuming that arts of invention cannot be developed for creative writing, some poets have already developed and worked with heuristics designed to produce poetry. It seems that we have a situation where the practitioners in the creative writing field are ahead of the

theoreticians of the composing process. Already Kenneth Koch and others are getting good results from teaching poetic heuristics.[8] One of the major discoveries, furthermore, is that Koch has had good results teaching poetry to different age levels -- an extremely important point for further research in writing as a developmental process. In addition, Stephen Dunning has had good results with workshops that have drawn participants from academia and town, a sociologically diverse group. We may not know absolutely what processes skillful writers go through when they write. We do have good materials available of what good writers who teach advise other writers.[9]

Let's take it as a given that poetic invention strategies can generate poetry. Can they also help produce better essays? I think so, because poetic invention strategies have crucial advantages. They are primarily generative rather than descriptive. Poetic invention techniques focus on getting writers started. Koch has an exercise, for example, that directs writers to begin each line with "I wish" and include a city or country, a color, and a comic-strip character.[10] With such directions, a writer can begin and even develop variations because nothing terrible will happen if the formula is disrupted. Instead of comic-strip characters, a writer could easily do tv characters. Or the last line could be changed to begin with something other than "I wish." Traditional descriptive models identify what a piece of writing should look like at the end, rather than at the beginning. Most poets find challenge and pleasure in straining against forms rather than blandly conforming to them. It's time students had the same chance.

And it is also time that students could learn the same feelings of discovery and catharsis that other writers enjoy. Poetic invention strategies have this advantage because they rely on the students' capabilities for self-discovery rather than on students absorbing large amounts of new outside material. I wish briefly to distinguish the type of invention developed in creative writing classes from those of traditional rhetoric. In analyzing the traditional systems, Janet Emig notes that "inventio, the first division of classical rhetoric, does not refer to the writer's finding within his own experience the sources of his discourse; it refers rather to discovering, in the universe outside, the topoi . . . ."[11] On the other hand, both modern linguistics-based heuristics and, to an even greater extent, poetic heuristics focus on the writers making discoveries that are both within their experiences and part of the world outside. Koch implies this point when he talks about teaching people to write poetry: "Teaching really is not the right word for what takes place: it is more like permitting the children to discover something they already have."[12] One of the goals of teaching first-year composition is to get students to begin playing with, experimenting with the content already latent in their minds. The reason for the failure of so much of composition is that it spends a lot of time teaching content which has nothing to do with the process of writing itself but which is used simply to generate subjects to write about, as if students had nothing already. Unfortunately, such courses foster the classic dull student paper -- the one which assumes that the more books and articles read, the better the paper. These papers frequently begin: "Webster's defines X as . . . ."

Writers take what they discover and transform it into an act of communication, thereby linking the personal and social worlds. We must teach writing in such a way that students get the good parts -- both the external form of what writing looks like and the internal reasons for

writing. Koch expresses the finest goals of any writing program when he talks about teaching children to write poetry.

> The educational advantages of a creative intellectual and emotional activity which children enjoy are clear. Writing poetry makes children feel happy, capable, and creative. It makes them feel more open to understanding and appreciating what others have written (literature). It even makes them want to know how to spell and say things correctly (grammar) . . . . Of all these advantages, the main one is how writing poetry makes children feel: creative; original; responsive, yet in command.[13]

These goals have been listed before, but it is to the credit of poetic invention strategies that they help writers make progress in achieving these goals. This point is important because a behavioral scientist examining the practices of many standard writing courses would conclude that we were trying to extinguish the behavior of writing. We are so wrapped up in producing a mistake-free surface that we punish every time we wield the red pencil. Further, we tend to talk about strong, vigorous writing in maddeningly vauge ways. The student might well be as aware as the teacher that his paper is weak, and yet the question "what can I do about it" remains unanswered.

What I recommend is that teachers use group exercises in composition classes as pre-writing exercises. I advise group exercises first because the loneliness of writing by oneself often produces anxiety. Doing an exercise together can help students by providing group support at the initial stage of beginning to write. When a student becomes engaged in a task, he or she will be able to continue alone. For these group exercises, linguistics-based heuristics can be used in conjunction with poetic invention exercises.[14] I expect that most creative writing teachers have material that would be adaptable in a composition class, but I will provide one exercise as a model to suggest how creative writing methodology can stimulate invention in the writing of essays. I emphasize that this is just one exercise. The crucial characteristic shared by all such exercises is a well-defined, easily apprehended structure which needs completion. The formal possibilities are limited while the imaginative ones are open. For example, one might set up a "now/then" or "it seemed to be/but it really was" dichotomy. A specific exercise might begin "Then, high schools _____; now, they _____." Teachers can choose many different examples for the high school slot. Writers might later on their own choose a different topic for the high school option, but at least for a group exercise, the class must agree on a single subject. Students can be advised that what they fill in the blanks doesn't have to be true in a conventional, though the statement must be believable. Class clowns will probably produce outrageous responses, but at this time one wants the students to be a little silly. And they won't be able to keep it up indefinitely. It takes a professional comedian with a lot of practice to sustain a monologue. A greater hazard is the safe answer. This problem can be dealt with by demanding detail, rather than abstractions. At this point, the idea is to produce imaginative concepts rather than rational judgments. Some these sentences will, undoubtedly, be generated, but they are not the immediate goal.

The structure implicit in "then/now" takes a good deal of pressure off the students in brainstorming. They don't have to come up with the logical structure as well as the detail. You may find that students will come up with something that doesn't fit the structure, in which case you bend the structure. According to Grace Paley, as the teacher, it's your shop. The point is not to end with the formula but to begin with it. An exercise is not a substitute for an essay; it is, rather, an attempt to stimulate invention. I am wary of prescribing too specifically since classes have their own dynamics and needs, but students in composition classes, who are usually taught description, narration, process, and so forth, can benefit from poetic invention exercises to enrich their writing.

The creative writing exercise, which addresses itself to invention, can add to traditional rhetoric, which assumes that thinking depends solely on intellect rather than on a combination of intelligence, imagination, and practice. Implicit in traditional rhetoric is a somewhat static view of mind -- that people either have imagination or go without. It does not seem to recognize in any practical fashion that the imagination is a faculty that can be developed, like the coordination required to play the piano. Paradoxically the rationally-based rhetorics become anti-educational. They educate the analytical intellect but fail to even recognize that human beings possess other faculties that can benefit by education. It is time for writing programs to inaugurate change.

Notes

[1]Teaching Expository Writing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 27.

[2]Research on Composing: Points of Departure (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), xii.

[3]Irmscher, p. 79.

[4]Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 111.

[5]Particularly useful work on invention can be found in Richard Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

[6]See Young, Becker, and Pike, pp. 119-130, for example.

[7]"Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," in Research on Composing, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell.

[8]Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry (New York: Chelsea, 1970).

[9]For instance, see Writers as Teachers, Teachers as Writers, ed. Jonathan Baumbach (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

[10]Koch, pp. 5-8.

[11]The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971), p. 17.

[12]Koch, p. 25.

[13]Koch, p. 53.

[14]Besides the work by Young, Becker, and Pike, new materials are regularly appearing. See, for instance, Cynthia L. Selfe and Sue Rodi, "An Invention Heuristic for Expressive Writing." College Composition and Communication, 31, No. 2 (May 1980), 169-174.